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RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0408  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2427  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 6973  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4809  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001747

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)  
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: A/S BOUCHER ADVOCATES ACCESS FOR  
INTERNATIONAL NGOS

REF: COLOMBO 1626 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In his October 19-20 meetings with Government of Sri Lanka authorities, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher addressed the issues of access and safety for humanitarian organizations, and the Government's seeming public ambivalence towards them. While Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera and Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa offered assurances that they support the work of aid agencies despite administrative misunderstandings, Trincomalee Government Agent Major General DeSilva contended frankly that authorities suspect local staff of these organizations of being associated with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Meanwhile, representatives spoke candidly to us about these perceptions and how they hamper their ability to operate "on the ground." End Summary.

Nongovernmental Organizations Report "Harassment"

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¶2. (C) A/S Boucher and Ambassador Blake met with representatives from UN organizations, the International Committee for the Red Cross, the American Refugee Committee and Mercy Corps in Trincomalee on October 20. All complained that the Sri Lankan government's public criticism and ambivalence hampers their operational ability. They complained of onerous and capricious regulations, noting, for example, that Government Agent DeSilva had warned them it would be "illegal" for nongovernmental organization representatives to hold multi-agency meetings in which the Government Agent did not take part. They reported that no nongovernmental organizations had been given permits to work in "uncleared" or Tiger-controlled areas since June for fear that nongovernmental organization funds would be used or stolen by the Tigers. A representative from Mercy Corps claimed that when Sri Lankan Government officials make critical public statements against humanitarian groups, local staff members encounter increased harassment at checkpoints.

¶3. (C) Similarly, in an October 14 session with Consular Officers and USAID, which was held as a follow-up to a Town Hall the Ambassador held with American Citizens,

nongovernmental representatives lamented that the authorities suspect their local staff members of being on the payroll of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. American Refugee Committee country director John Holveck claimed that the Nongovernmental Organization Secretariat recently asked expatriate staff to provide the names, home addresses, telephone numbers, and National Identity Card numbers of all of their local staff. In the October 20 meeting with A/S Boucher, Holveck expressed concern about the possibility of another massacre like that of the 17 Alliance Contre La Faim workers in Muttur (reftel) because of the Government's alleged contempt for humanitarian organizations. In an October 14 meeting, the country director for North West Medical Teams told ConOff that a Sri Lankan government representative said to a multi-agency nongovernmental meeting, "If you all had been behaving better, (the) Muttur (murders) wouldn't have happened."

For Whom Do They Really Work?  
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14. (C) A/S Boucher raised the issue of the climate for organizations operating in Sri Lanka to the Trincomalee "Government Agent," Major General DeSilva, whose district has borne the brunt of the conflict and the resulting humanitarian issues since July 2006. Nongovernmental organization workers there have frequently complained of harassment by authorities. The Government Agent replied that he has "no problem" with the United Nations agencies, the International Committee for the Red Cross or USAID, but expressed suspicion that other organizations rely on national rather than expatriate staff. DeSilva argued, "They (local

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staff) are under contract with a third party, therefore we must monitor them on the ground."

15. (C) The Government Agent cited as an example the August 4 murders of 17 local staff members of the French organization Alliance Contre La Faim in Muttur, arguing: "Those staff were local Tamil people and we have sources who point out that they were there (in Muttur) after everyone else had left. Why? Other organizations and international agencies had left, but these people stayed even after the Tigers occupied Muttur." The Government Agent accused other nongovernmental organizations (accurately, in some cases) of squandering aid money and failing to do the relief work they had proposed, such as reaching their quotas of post-tsunami housing.

Minister, Secretary: Smiles and Nods  
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16. (C) In October 19-20 meetings with Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera and Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, A/S Boucher and Ambassador underlined the importance the U.S. attaches to nongovernmental organizations' ability to access affected communities. Ambassador Blake noted that nearly all of U.S. Government aid to Sri Lanka goes through such agencies. Samaraweera told A/S Boucher that Ministry of Defense permit requirements for organization staff amounted basically to bureaucratic bungling at the beginning, but they were now getting it sorted out. He cited the case of the French-based NGO "Solidarites" which had failed give back a "lift bag" (equipment to raise objects from the ocean floor) to the Navy as required and handed it over to a local employee instead. The Tigers, he contended, could have used the lift bag to recover equipment lost in the tsunami. Samaraweera added that a "high-level group" would help clear up these misunderstandings. Some expatriate nongovernmental workers mean well

but don't understand the realities here, he continued - and don't realize whom they may inadvertently be helping.

17. (C) Defense Secretary Gotabaya told A/S Boucher that the Government had no problem with the UN organizations or big, established international nongovernmentals. However, the

Government was worried about some of the small ones, Rajapaksa said. He pointed out there were more than 3,000 organizations active in Sri Lanka. After the tsunami, the Government had welcomed all help, but there was a loss of control. They had initially canceled some visas, but had then instructed the immigration authorities to allow existing organizations to remain. The Defense Secretary noted that "Solidarites" had admitted their mistake in not returning the lift bag and would be allowed to finish their drinking water and sanitation project in Ampara.

Does "Tamil" Sometimes Mean "Tiger"?  
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18. (C) COMMENT: Government Agent DeSilva's perception that local nongovernmental staff are on the payroll of the Tigers mirrors that of other Government authorities we've spoken to.

Joint Chief of Operations Admiral Perera dismissed the Muttur murders as "local Tamils" and therefore saw no reason for international alarm. The Government's suspicion and ambivalence towards nongovernmental organizations reflects their mistrust of ethnic Tamils working for organizations in contested areas. This mental equation of "Tamil" and "Tiger" is likely to persist. The U.S. will have to continue to use every opportunity to advocate for improved access for nongovernmental organizations.

BLAKE